

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

by Rev. Chase Peebles

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

(Isaiah 6:1-8, NRSV)

I am here to testify tonight. I am here to testify that I have seen the Promised Land. I have looked over the Jordan and I have seen it. The Promised Land has come to me in the form of cable television. It's the great wide world of twenty-four hour news, sports, reruns and infomercials. During my years of wandering in the wilderness of graduate school, cable remained a luxury that Jen and I could not afford, but now it is ours in all of its digital glory. Ah, the days I dreamed of a time when I would have more viewing options and when there was nothing on the standard broadcast channels, I would simply switch to one of the hundreds of others. Unfortunately, I've discovered that just because you have hundreds of channels doesn't mean there is anything on any of them worth watching.

It seems like I watch an awful lot of commercials on my cable TV. The commercials I see most often, seem to be for Oxiclean. You may have seen them. They're the ones with the guy sort of yelling at you about how Oxiclean can be used on everything from your patio to your laundry. It will wash any stain out with the "natural power of oxygen." These commercials are on all the time. They never stop running. I've been so worn down by the barrage of Oxiclean commercials that I've actually thought about buying a bucket to see if it actually does the miraculous things promised in the ads.

I haven't given in yet, because I was raised on television and specifically television commercials. I can still sing jingles from my childhood (My bologna has a first name...Plop, plop, fizz, fizz...). I know that commercials promise a lot and the reality of what products actually deliver rarely matches the hype. Beautiful women don't fall for dorky guys just because of the cologne they wear. Snowplows don't follow in the tracks of Jaguars in the middle of a blinding snowstorm. Friends and family don't love you any more just because you sent a Hallmark card rather than a generic one. While I'm sure

Oxiclean will clean some things, I'm also pretty sure that it will not enable me to throw out all of my other soap, cleaning supplies and detergent.

We've all learned to mistrust the hype of our consumer culture. "Low fat" doesn't really mean low fat. "100% Natural" doesn't really mean that there is anything in the product which actually occurs in nature. We've learned to take such absolute claims with a huge mountain of salt. So why should it be any different when we hear the absolute claims of Jesus?

In Matthew 5:8, Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." The first thing that comes to my mind when I read this verse is the question, "How can anyone really be pure in heart?" Mostly pure seems possible, but totally pure? That seems like a pipe dream. The difference, of course, is that Jesus is not an advertising executive. Perhaps, his outlandish claims may actually have some substance.

Tonight's Beatitude raises two important questions:

1. What the heck does it mean to be pure in heart?
2. What the heck does it mean to see God?

Let's tackle the second one first.

When Jesus speaks of "seeing God" I think he literally means seeing God. We're talking about a direct eyeball to eyeball encounter with the divine. One such encounter occurs in tonight's scripture passage, Isaiah 6. The prophet Isaiah walks into the temple and finds himself in the middle of a waking dream of the heavenly throne room of God. Understandably, when confronted with the holiness of God, Isaiah bemoans his own lackluster spiritual state. He declares, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." Isaiah recognizes that the words that come from his mouth reflect the desires of his heart, and his words like his heart is far from pure.

Isaiah has good reason to fear. From the time of Moses, God had made it clear that no mortal could withstand looking at the face of God. In Exodus 33, Moses asks to see God's face, but God states that no one can do so and live. Instead God places Moses in a cleft of the mountain and covers Moses with God's hand (which is where we get the old hymn "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me"). After God passes by, Moses looks and sees God from the back. I'm not sure what would have happened if Moses had seen God's face. Perhaps it would have been like the scene in Raiders of the Lost Ark where the Nazis open the Ark of the Covenant and their faces melt off. Whatever might have happened, it would have been more than a human could handle.

Isaiah, therefore, seems rightfully afraid when he comes face to face with God, but notice what happens. A seraph or angelic servant of God takes a hot coal with tongs and touches the coal to Isaiah's lips. I would imagine that it would take a whole lot of Blistex to clean up lips that have been touched by a fiery coal, yet there is no indication that this hurt Isaiah. Instead, the coal is God's means of purifying Isaiah so that the prophet can

hear the call of God. It is good news that God overcomes Isaiah's own weaknesses instead of leaving Isaiah to his own devices.

Like Isaiah, when we speak about the purity or lack thereof in our hearts, we can have hope that it is not up to us alone to somehow manage this purification. God makes up for all that we cannot do ourselves. God can purify our hearts and give us eyes to see God. We may not have visions like Isaiah of God upon the throne, but God can open our eyes to see the divine in the people around us and in everything that God has created.

This brings us back to our first question: what the heck does "pure in heart mean?" Purity implies a single essence. Like a metal that has been refined by means of intense heat, our hearts—the soul and very being of each one of us—can also be refined by the fire of God's spirit. The impurities of wounds suffered and given, egocentric thoughts and actions, and the other unattractive parts of ourselves can be burned away. The purification of our own essences results in a singularity of will and desire. This purity ties in directly with Jesus' teachings later on in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:21-24, Jesus states:

"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (NRSV)

Jesus is speaking of wealth, because the trappings of material comforts and the pleasure of being seen as successful are so beguiling, but his statement about two masters is true. We may multitask and compartmentalize, but in the end our loyalties are divided and fragmented. There is much to keep our hearts impure and clouded by the mixture of things we love as much as God. We remain double-minded and double-hearted.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote that "purity of heart is to will one thing." He describes that one thing simply as "the Good." God is the ultimate source of unity. God is one and entirely free of impurity. To will what God wills is to will THE good, because if it is truly "good," it is from God. Kierkegaard writes, "all ways lead to the Good, when a man in truth only wills one thing."¹ We may do many different things with our lives but all of our different activities can lead us towards God if our heart is so inclined.

Kierkegaard draws a distinction between our occupations and our vocations.² An occupation is the daily work one does, but a vocation is what we are called to do throughout our lives. God's call to us should determine how we carry out our occupations and may even determine what occupation we have in the first place. God's calling moves both above and in the midst of what we are occupied with. God calls us to consider both the ends we are seeking and the means we use to achieve them. The purity of our hearts determines how well we hear God's call to us.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, Trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper, 1948), 67.

² *Ibid.*, 197-211.

Jesus' declaration about an undivided heart stands in contrast to the religious people of his day. Later on in Matthew he takes aim at the type of religiosity that is only on the surface of a person rather than in the heart:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:23-38 NRSV)

Similarly, the epistle of James describes the content of the religion of the pure in heart:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27 NRSV)

So purity of heart does not result in an inward-looking piety but an outward-moving concern for others. The writer of James lists widows and orphans as the concern of the pure in heart, because in his day these were the people with the least power in society. They were the ones most in need of help. Our society may be different, but we are still called to care for those who are powerless.

Yet, going back to the hyperbole of TV commercials, like sensational advertisements the purity of our hearts seems too good to be true. Each of us knows the thoughts we have and deeds we commit when no one is watching—especially when no one is watching. No matter what others may think of us good or bad, we know the truth about ourselves. Our hearts can be far from pure. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God does what we cannot do. God purifies our own hearts beyond what we can do on our own. The writer of James states, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." (4:8) As we reach out to God, God reaches towards us. No matter how far we can or cannot reach God makes up the difference.

Once Isaiah's lips and heart were purified by God, he was then open to hearing God's call. In the same way, when we allow the spirit of God to enter us and purify us our ears can receive God's call to us. Hopefully, we will respond in the manner of Isaiah and say, "Here I am send me."

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